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# Critical Pedagogy and the Information Cycle: A Practical Application

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## CHAPTER 8\*

# Critical Pedagogy and the Information Cycle

## A Practical Application

*Gina Schlesselman-Tarango and Frances Suderman*

### Introduction

The following lesson plan was taught as part of a larger first-year composition course assignment asking students to examine the questions, lexicon, expertise, texts, and modes of communication valued in specific discourse communities. This larger assignment required students to incorporate data (including observations, interviews, and texts) and two articles, one of which had to be a peer-reviewed journal article. The hour-long lesson described here exposes students to the concept that texts emerge from and reflect specific times, spaces, and places, and it is meant to help students better understand their chosen discourse community.

This lesson plan could be implemented with students who are new to using and incorporating sources or with those unfamiliar with the differences between scholarly and popular sources. This lesson can be delivered in one session, though we recommend splitting it into two separate sessions.

As Sara Franks notes, the information cycle has traditionally framed information creation as passive, natural, predetermined, and apolitical.<sup>1</sup> Rather than encouraging students to interrogate the social nature of information, the

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cycle acts as a grand narrative, obscuring the human choices that go into the creation of texts. Franks encourages us to bring these choices and actions to the forefront so that “we can begin to instigate among our students an important realization that information is not a prepackaged thing that naturally reappears in various sources over years.”<sup>2</sup> In line with Franks’s call, we do not reject the information cycle altogether, but rather apply critical pedagogy to this tool to highlight contextuality. We turn to the information cycle to attend to issues of power,<sup>3</sup> asking students to engage in critical analyses of representation. Our lesson plan achieves this by using texts following the murder of Trayvon Martin and subsequent acquittal of George Zimmerman to examine the black male body as spectacle made possible through both historical and contemporary socioeconomic contexts and racial dynamics.<sup>4</sup> A move from focusing solely on written content to include analyses of images and authority asks students to acknowledge larger structures at work in shaping information, particularly as they influence the ways in which whiteness and blackness, guilt and innocence, and the knowing versus the unknowing are communicated and reinforced.<sup>5</sup> Further, prompting students to attend to advertisements present in these texts illuminates the fact that information dissemination is often a money-making business, regardless of whether that information is accessed through the open Web or a proprietary database.

The political nature of information creation is particularly evident when one selects a socially charged topic, which also lends itself to rich classroom discussion and analysis. Though the composition class was not centered on representation or violence against people of color, we chose this topic because we felt that many of the students would have heard of Trayvon Martin or George Zimmerman and would thus come to class with background knowledge from which they could draw. Additionally, the broader problem of violence against people of color is explored in the literature, which introduces students to a variety of disciplinary approaches to the topic.<sup>\*</sup> Imagining the authors or creators of each text as representatives of discourse communities was helpful in highlighting the social and political nature of information. Further, asking students to critically dialogue with a variety of texts allowed us to connect the composition theory guiding the course with a number of other critical pedagogical approaches.<sup>6</sup> In using the information cycle as a way to illustrate that information creation, dissemination, and access is a social and political process, we were able to explore the ways in which all types of information—including scholarly articles—emerge from specific and, at times, exclusionary discourse communities and social contexts.<sup>7</sup>

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\* Certainly, this lesson could be adapted to other topics, particularly those that expose students to the ways in which forces such as race and gender shape the information environment.

We called upon feminist pedagogy in designing and delivering this lesson, as this approach positions instructors as facilitators rather than lecturers, recognizing that students come with valuable experience and knowledge that can be leveraged in the classroom.<sup>8</sup> Tapping into student strengths creates a space where students can collectively learn from and about one another, and this was made possible through small-group work, student-led instruction, and group discussion. Feminist pedagogy further aims to highlight and work against oppression and injustice, and exploring the information cycle through the texts created after Zimmerman's acquittal was a fruitful way to highlight the persistence of racial violence.

A related approach we looked to was cyberfeminist pedagogy, which encourages students not only to critique the online environment, but also to work to understand the digital realm as a potentially productive space.<sup>9</sup> We considered user-generated media as a valuable site of teaching and learning and discussed that while Twitter, for example, can be used as a tool to advance negative stereotypes, it can at the same time function as a site of activism for those in marginalized groups.<sup>10</sup> Because this session was not delivered in a computer lab, it also allowed students who brought technological devices to draw upon their own comfort and experience navigating online information.<sup>†</sup> For example, rather than insisting that students use "credible" library tools to locate background information on an author or to determine whether their text was part of a larger source, they were free to attempt to locate that information however they felt most comfortable.

## Learning Outcomes

- Examine the cycle of information production and publication and distinguish between a variety of source types in order to determine the values, perspectives, and processes that shape texts.
- Identify sources having purpose, authority, and audience consistent with one's information needs.

## Materials

- Laptops and/or tablets (optional).
- Whiteboard.

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<sup>†</sup> We encouraged students ahead of time to bring laptops, phones, or tablets, which ensured that every student group had at least one tool available. However, bringing a tablet or laptop for each group is another option, as we recognize that not every student has their own device.

- Video primer to provide context for the subject matter of the lesson: “Zimmerman Acquittal: Cries for Justice Continue.”<sup>11</sup> Instructor may ask students to view this prior to the session.
- Deep reading handout (see appendix 8A).
- Sources for student groups (if students are not in a lab, digital content will need to be printed):
  - a: Tweet(s), Facebook post(s), or other user-generated social media content. We used Tweets created by President Obama, Trayvon Martin’s father, and a celebrity.
  - b: Online newspaper article(s). We used an article that addressed protests following Zimmerman’s acquittal as well as a report of Martin’s parents’ response.
  - c: Magazine article. We used an article in *Time* magazine, whose cover featured an image of a hoodie.
  - d: Scholarly journal article. We used “The Influence of the Trayvon Martin Shooting on Racial Socialization Practices of African American Parents.”<sup>12</sup>
  - e: Another scholarly journal article from a different discipline. We used “Calling a Thing What It Is: A Lutheran Approach to Whiteness.”<sup>13</sup>
  - f: Book(s). We used an e-book, *Violence at the Urban Margins*, and a print book, *Suspicion Nation: The Inside Story of the Trayvon Martin Injustice and Why We Continue to Repeat It*.<sup>14</sup>
- Information cycle note catcher (see appendix 8B).

## Session Instructions

1. Begin by asking students to share what they recall about Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman. Show them the video primer, or ask a student to provide a summary if the video was viewed prior to the session. Share that the class will create an information cycle to explore the types of sources that emerged after Zimmerman’s acquittal and will analyze how the types of information available to us not only change over time, but are also shaped by sociohistorical context. Instructor should be present to connect these outcomes to larger assignment and course learning objectives.
2. Break students into groups of five or fewer, giving each group a source that was created at a different point on the information cycle—ensure that both popular and scholarly sources are provided. Ask that student groups do a deep reading of their sources using the deep reading handout (see appendix 8A).

3. Groups then present their findings to the class, projecting a digital copy of their source for all to view. After each group has presented, the source and any relevant notes (e.g., publication date) are placed on the information cycle on a whiteboard. Encourage students to take notes on information cycle note catchers (see appendix 8B) for future reference.
4. Whole-class discussion after the presentations should be used to encourage students to distinguish between source types in order to determine the values, perspectives, and processes that shape them. Discussion should touch on key similarities and differences among the sources, such as publication date, language, audience, perceived authority of the creator, how that authority is communicated, use of images, how sources are accessed, and so on. Instructors may ask questions like these: How does knowing the date this was published affect your reading of the source? What kind of vocabulary/tone differences do you identify among sources? Why do you think this author is/is not credible? Do you suspect any author bias? What message is the author/creator trying to send to the reader? How does the author/creator use images in the text? Which processes went into the creation of this text? How is this text made available? Who can access this text? By asking such questions, instructors are modeling how to independently critically engage with and evaluate sources. Encourage students take notes on their information cycle note catchers during discussion for future reference.

## Assessment

For our pre-assessment, we used an in-class discussion to survey student understanding of how information is created and distributed. Students also shared what they knew about Martin's murder and Zimmerman's acquittal before or after viewing the video primer. Formative assessment included checking in with students during group work time when they completed the deep reading handouts. Further formative assessment took place when students presented their group's findings to the class. Summative assessment came from the whole-group discussion and a one-minute paper. Students continued to perform deep readings related to their own topics for the larger class assignment, which provided continued summative assessment.

## Reflections

Course instructor presence is especially important when content is potentially controversial; for instance, we encountered one student who strongly vocalized a rather divisive position, and it was apparent that he would continue to

dominate the conversation if no one intervened. Such an opinion likely made others in the classroom uncomfortable, and Frances leveraged her relationship with the student to challenge him to rethink his position and consider alternative viewpoints. This negotiation would have been difficult for Gina, who did not have a previous relationship with the student or knowledge of the classroom dynamics. Other students, of course, shared very insightful responses to the texts and issues during both small- and whole-group discussions.

We recommend that students be exposed to scholarly articles before this librarian-led session. We found that academic articles were new to some, who in turn struggled with the deep reading; for example, one group assumed that the presence of the author affiliations—a common practice in academia used to signal one's authority and expertise—meant that the authors were students at the listed institutions. Others found themselves caught up in attempting to understand the thesis of a scholarly argument and thus did not attend to the other deep reading prompts in depth. An instructor-led exercise or flipped classroom model in which students locate, access, and read a peer-reviewed article prior to the librarian-led session would encourage familiarity with the formatting and language of such texts.

## Final Questions

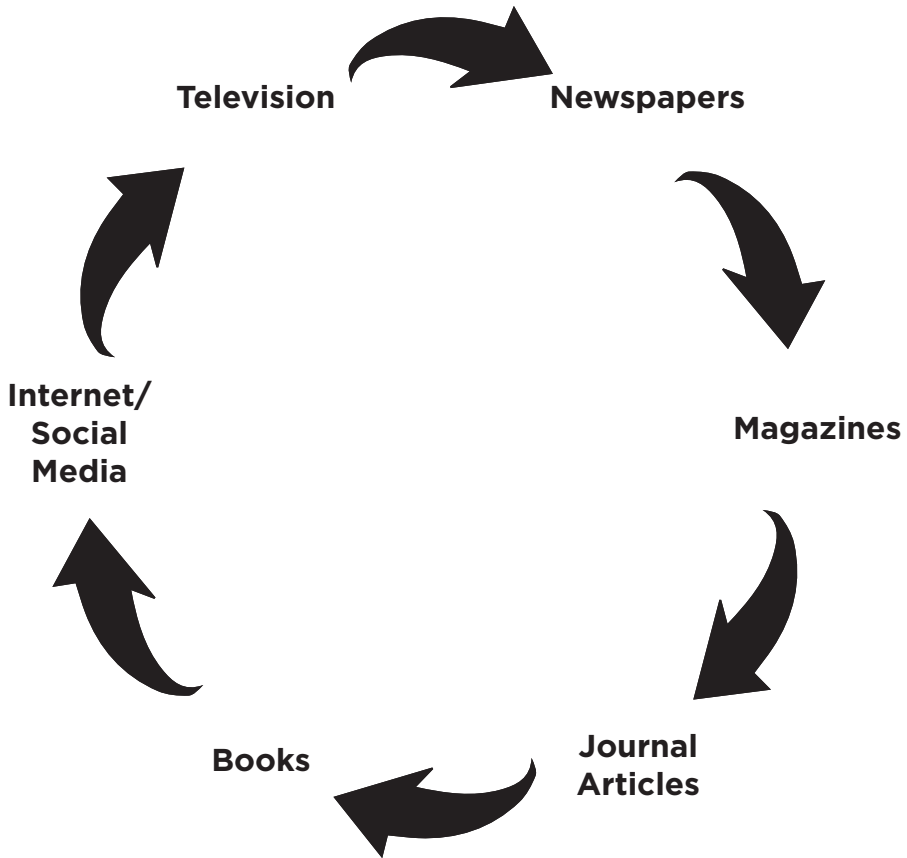
How can we engage students in the larger discussions taking place in academic journal articles? Specifically, how do we problematize scholarly discourse communities while at the same time teaching the value of engaging with them? Are there other assignments where students might benefit from using the information cycle to engage in critical analysis?

## Appendix 8A: Deep Reading Handout

1. Date our source was published/created:
2. Title of our source:
3. Is this part of a larger source? For example, is it a chapter in a book? Article in a journal or newspaper? How can you tell?
4. Author:
5. What do you know about this author (where they work, what they do, other sources they've created, their relationship to Trayvon Martin or George Zimmerman, etc.)? If you can't tell from your source, use your own cell phone/tablet/laptop to research the author.
6. What is your source about? What is the author's argument? If you can't tell from the information that's been provided, use context clues to take your best guess.
7. What would you say about the language used in the source? Is it difficult to understand, or fairly simple?
8. Who do you think is the audience for your source? Why?
9. What about the visuals in your source? For example, are there images used to support the message, provide evidence, or that give you information about the author? Are there images that distract?
10. Where or how would you get this source? Would you have to use technology to access it? Would you have to pay for it?



## Appendix 8B: Information Cycle Note



### Catcher

**To think about:** Where would other sources fall on this cycle, such as documentary films? Radio broadcasts? Government reports? Datasets? Blog posts?

## Notes

1. Sara Franks, "Grand Narratives and the Information Cycle in the Library Instruction Classroom," in *Critical Library Instruction*, ed. Maria T. Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier (Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2010), 43–54.
2. Ibid., 48.
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4. Ronald L. Jackson, *Scripting the Black Masculine Body* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2006); Safiya Umoja Noble, "Teaching Trayvon: Race, Media, and the Politics of Spectacle," *Black Scholar* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 12–29, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5816/blackscholar.44.1.0012>; George Yancy and Janine Jones, "Introduction," in *Pursuing Trayvon Martin* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), 1–23.
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6. Mariolina Salvatori, "Conversations with Texts: Reading in the Teaching of Composition," *College English* 58, no. 4 (1996): 440–54, doi:10.2307/378854.
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8. Maria T. Accardi, *Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2013); bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
9. Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149–81; Gina Schlesselman-Tarango, "Cyborgs in the Academic Library: A Cyberfeminist Approach to Information Literacy Instruction," *Behavioral and Social Sciences Librarian* 33, no. 1 (2014): 29–46, doi:10.1080/01639269.2014.872529; Susan Hawthorne and Renate Klein, *Cyberfeminism* (North Melbourne, Vic.: Spinifex Press, 1999).
10. Andrew Battista, "From 'A Crusade against Ignorance' to 'a Crisis of Authenticity': Curating Information for a Participatory Democracy," in *Information Literacy and Social Justice*, ed. Lua Gregory and Shana Higgins (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2013), 81–98; Maura Seale, "Information Literacy Standards and the Politics of Knowledge Production: Using User-Generated Content to Incorporate Critical Pedagogy," in *Critical Library Instruction*, ed. Maria T. Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier (Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2010), 221–35.
11. CBS News (Sunday Morning), "Zimmerman Acquittal: Cries for Justice Continue," video, 1:54, July 14, 2013, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/zimmerman-acquittal-cries-for-justice-continue>.
12. Anita Thomas and Sha'Kema M. Blackmon, "The Influence of the Trayvon Martin Shooting on Racial Socialization Practices of African American Parents," *Journal of Black Psychology* 41, no.1 (2015): 75–89, doi:10.1177/0095798414563610.
13. Deanna A. Thompson, "Calling a Thing What It Is: A Lutheran Approach to Whiteness," *Dialog* 53, no. 1 (March 2014): 49–57, doi:10.1111/dial.12088.
14. Javier Auyero, Philippe Bourgois, and Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Violence at the Urban Margins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Lisa Bloom, *Suspicion Nation* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2014).

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